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SUBJECT: ETHIOPIA PASSES RESTRICTIVE CSO LAW

REF: A. ADDIS 3381 B. ADDIS 3100 C. ADDIS 2482 D.
ADDIS 3159

11. (SBU) On January 6, the Ethiopian Parliament passed a new Charities and Societies Proclamation (CSO law)(Refs A-C) to regulate the conduct of civil society organizations. As expected, the law prohibits civil society organizations that receive more than ten percent of their funding from foreign sources from engaging in activities that promote human rights and democracy, the rights of children and the disabled, equality among nations, nationalities, people, gender and religion, and conflict resolution or reconciliation. The CSO law provides an ill-defined carve-out for activities funded pursuant to a bilateral agreement with the Ethiopian government. As a result, it is difficult to determine at this time the extent to which the law will impact USAID grantees or other implementing partners, particularly in such restricted areas as democracy and governance. The CSO law also delineates stiff penalties for violations of its provisions, including potential criminal liability and fines of up to USD 5000 for organizations and USD 2000 for individuals. Note: The Embassy will not see the final English version of the law for some weeks, until it is published officially. End Note.

12. (SBU) The Embassy has repeatedly and privately raised concerns about the CSO law with the Ethiopian government. The passage of the CSO law, combined with the recent passage of a restrictive media law (Septel) and a wave of arrests of opposition party members/officials (Ref D), provides the Ethiopian government express legal grounds to tighten control of civil society. While many US-funded programs will likely be permitted to continue due to the strength of our bilateral relationship, many Ethiopian CSOs that receive significant foreign funding will likely be unable to continue their activities in a number of critical areas.
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